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THIS ESSAY IS SAID TO HAVE CAUSED THE ESTRANGEMENT
BETWEEN WHISTLER AND SWINBURNE, WHICH
CONTINUED UNTIL WHISTLER'S DEATH

The Fortnightly Review.
June. 1888.

MR. WHISTLER'S LECTURE ON ART.

To speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, may justly be required of the average witness; it cannot be expected, it should not be exacted, of any critical writer or lecturer on any form of art. Even when the writer is an acknowledged and indisputable master in his own line of work, it is not to be supposed or imagined that there cannot possibly be anything to add to his conclusions, or that his utterances are to be of necessity accepted without qualification or reserve. The great question is whether he is right or wrong in his main contention; whether the message he delivers is worthy or unworthy of consideration and acceptance in its most significant and distinctive point. And it appears to one at least of those unfortunate "outsiders" for whose judgment or whose "meddling" Mr. Whistler has so imperial and Olympian a contempt, that the most notable thing in the famous lecture on art which he has now transmitted to the printers is the assertion in terms of most felicitous accuracy, the explanation on grounds which no imaginable reader could mistake, of a dominant and central truth which is not more certain, more necessary, more important, with reference to any one of the arts than to any other; and which is more vital, more certain, more indispensable as a condition of creative work than any other axiom or postulate whatever. This truth is the principle of independence; the simple and sufficient gospel which affirms that the first duty of a workman in any particular line is to do good work in that and no other than that line, and that if he does this it is a matter of quite secondary consideration whether his work may or may not be commendable on any foreign or external or accidental ground. It should be unnecessary to add that this principle cannot either fairly or plausibly be so strained and wrested as to cover, for example, the literary offences of French pornographers and coprologists. M. Zola and his merry men are artists only in the sense—if such a sense there be—in which the term is applicable to a dealer in coloured photographs of unmentionable subjects. Sweeping aside into the gutter such dirty little vermin as know no more of æsthetics than of ethics, of taste or intelligence than of decency or shame, we proceed to examine the question as seriously stated by an artist and a theorist of serious pretensions and indisputable accomplishments. And we find what we might have made sure of finding in the present case; brilliant and pungent wit, wisdom salted with paradox and reason spiced with eccentricity; truths and semi-truths, admirable propositions and questionable inferences. Much that Mr. Whistler has to say

about the primary requisites and the radical conditions of art is not merely sound and solid good sense as well as vivid and pointed rhetoric, it is a message very specially needed by the present generation of students in art or letters. Those only who have laid it to heart may be permitted to point out that it is not all the truth; that it is by no manner of means an exhaustive and complete statement of the capacities and the duties, the objects and the properties of creative or imaginative art.

Let us begin at the end, as all reasonable people always do: we shall find that Mr. Whistler concedes to Greek art a place beside Japanese. Now this, on his own showing, will never do; it crosses, it contravenes, it nullifies, it pulverizes his theory or his principle of artistic limitation. If Japanese art is right in confining itself to what can be "broidered upon the fan,"—and the gist of the whole argument is in favour of this assumption,—then the sculpture which appeals indeed first of all to our perception of beauty, to the delight of the eye, to the wonder and the worship of the instinct or the sense, but which in every possible instance appeals also to far other intuitions and far other sympathies than these, is as absolutely wrong, as demonstrably inferior, as any picture or as any carving which may be so degenerate and so debased as to concern itself with a story or a subject. Assuredly Phidias thought of other things than "arrangements" in marble—as certainly as Æschylus thought of other things than "arrangements" in metre. Nor, I am sorely afraid, can the adored Velasquez be promoted to a seat "at the foot of Fusi-yama." Japanese art is not merely the incomparable achievement of certain harmonies in colour; it is the negation, the immolation, the annihilation of everything else. By the code which accepts as the highest of models and of masterpieces the cups and fans and screens with which "the poor world" has been as grievously "pestered" of late years as ever it was in Shakespeare's time "with such waterflies—diminutives of nature" as excited the scorn of his moralizing cynic, Velasquez is as unquestionably condemned as is Raphael or Titian. It is true that his miraculous power of hand makes beautiful for us the deformity of dwarfs, and dignifies the degradation of princes; but that is not the question. It is true, again, that Mr. Whistler's own merest "arrangements" in colour are lovely and effective; but his portraits, to speak of these alone, are liable to the damning and intolerable imputation of possessing not merely other qualities than these, but qualities which actually appeal—I blush to remember and I shudder to record it—which actually appeal to the intelligence and the emotions, to the mind and heart of the spectator. It would be quite useless for Mr. Whistler to protest—if haply he should be so disposed—that he never meant to put study of character and revelation of intellect into his portrait of

Mr. Carlyle, or intense pathos of significance and tender depth of expression into the portrait of his own venerable mother. The scandalous fact remains, that he has done so; and in so doing has explicitly violated and implicitly abjured the creed and the canons, the counsels and the catechism of Japan.

Apart from the crowning and central merit of this lecture, which I have attempted to indicate at starting, the most notable and memorable thing in it is rather the excellence of certain detached or detachable passages or phrases than any continuity of reasoning or coherence of argument. But some of these passages or phrases are very jewels of epigram or of illustration. What, for instance, can be happier or more sensible, wittier or more effective, than this? "To say to the painter that Nature is to be taken as she is, is to say to the player that he may sit on the piano." Not of course that this is a discovery of Mr. Whistler's; for the finest and the fullest evidence of its truth now extant in the world is flashed out on us from every great or characteristic work of Turner.

This, again, is a very just as well as a very striking sarcasm; though it does not exactly prove that there is no loveliness in distinct outline, no grandeur in luminous clearness.

"The dignity of the snow-capped mountain is lost in distinctness, but the joy of the tourist is to recognise the traveller on the top. The desire to see, for the sake of seeing, is, with the mass, alone the one to be gratified, hence the delight in detail."

But it is hardly to the countrymen of Crome and David Cox that the beauty and the glory of painted wind and cloud and mist can be preached as the gospel of a new revelation. However, we can but be grateful for this indirect protest against the kind of art which gives us landscapes worthy only of a botanist or geometrician, and seascapes which represent the most lovely and luminous and living and various and subtle in colour of all imaginable seas—our own incomparable Channel—as a dead mass of densely stupid blue, so hard that if you were to hit it with a hammer the hammer would break into shivers, so monotonous and so monochromical that it would almost be a libel on the very Mediterranean itself.

Another excellent remark may be quoted from a later part of this desultory lecture:—"Art happens—no hovel is safe from it, no prince may depend upon it; the vastest intelligence cannot bring it about, and puny efforts to make it universal end in quaint comedy or coarse farce."

Unquestionably they may or they must do so; but it does not follow that all efforts to widen the sphere of appreciation, to enlarge the circle of intelligence, must needs be puny or unprofitable. Good intentions will not secure good results; but neither—strange as it may seem—will the absence of good intentions. And when Mr. Whistler informs us that "there never was an artistic period," we

must reply that the statement, so far as it is true, is the flattest of all possible truisms; for no mortal ever maintained that there ever was a period in which all men were either good artists or good judges of art. But when we pass from the positive to the comparative degree of historic or retrospective criticism, we must ask whether the lecturer means to say that there have not been times when the general standard of taste and judgment, reason and perception, was so much higher than at other times that such periods may justly and accurately be defined as artistic. If he does mean to say this, he is beyond answer and beneath confutation: in other words, he is where an artist of Mr. Whistler's genius and a writer of Mr. Whistler's talents can by no possibility find himself. If he does not mean to say this, what he means to say is exactly as well worth saying, as valuable and as important a piece of information, as the news that Queen Anne is no more, or that two and two are not generally supposed to make five.

But if the light and glittering bark of this brilliant amateur in the art of letters is not invariably steered with equal dexterity of hand between the Scylla and Charybdis of paradox and platitude, it is impossible that in its course it should not once and again touch upon some point worth notice if not exploration. Even that miserable animal "the unattached writer" may gratefully and respectfully recognise his accurate apprehension and his felicitous application of wellnigh the most hackneyed verse in all the range of Shakespeare's —which yet is almost invariably misconstrued and misapplied. "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin:" and this, as the poet goes on to explain, is that all, with one consent, prefer worthless but showy novelties to precious but familiar possessions. "This one chord that vibrates with all," says Mr. Whistler, who proceeds to cite artistic examples of the lamentable fact, "this one unspoken sympathy that pervades humanity, is—Vulgarity." But the consequence which he proceeds to indicate and to deplore is calculated to strike his readers with a sense of mild if hilarious astonishment. It is that men of sound judgment and pure taste, quick feelings and clear perceptions, most unfortunately and most inexplicably begin to make their voices "heard in the land." Porson, as all the world knows, observed of the Germans of his day that "in Greek" they were "sadly to seek." It is no discredit to Mr. Whistler if this is his case also: but then he would do well to eschew the use of a Greek term lying so far out of the common way as the word "æsthete." Not merely the only accurate meaning but the only possible meaning of that word is nothing more but nothing less than this: an intelligent, appreciative, quick-witted person; in a word, as the lexicon has it, "one who perceives." The man who is no æsthete stands confessed, by the logic of language and the necessity of the case, as a thick-witted, tasteless, senseless and impenetrable blockhead. I do not wish to insult

Mr. Whistler, but I feel bound to avow my impression that there is no man now living who less deserves the honour of enrolment in such ranks as these—of a seat in the synagogue of the anæsthetic. I cannot bring myself to descend to flattery so gross and insincere as would be the admission that a Saul of his spiritual stature is also among the prophets of Philistia; that his place is beside the blatant boobies with whom the imputation of intelligence—an imputation which they surely cannot apprehend on their own account—passes for a cutting and branding insult. It would no doubt be most unseemly, and to the shrinking modesty, the too sensitive diffidence of Mr. Whistler it would of course be quite exceptionally painful, to claim the title, to arrogate the honours, of a person so exceptionally endowed with good taste, right feeling, keen insight, sound judgment and clear perception, as specially to deserve the Platonic title of an æsthete; for no satire could be severe enough for the male or female fool who should venture to put forward so arrogant a claim; but it would be an incongruity even more portentous and prodigious, an incongruity for which Rabelais alone of all men could have supplied the fitting chain of epithets, if an artist of skill so consummate, of tact so refined, of so sensitive an instinct and so delicate an eccentricity, should use the word—if he knew the meaning of the word—as a term of ridicule or reproach. Such abuse of language is possible only to the drivelling desperation of venomous or fangless duncery: it is in higher and graver matters, of wider bearing and of deeper import, that we find it necessary to dispute the apparently serious propositions or assertions of Mr. Whistler. How far the witty tongue may be thrust into the smiling cheek when the lecturer pauses to take breath between these remarkably brief paragraphs it would be certainly indecorous and possibly superfluous to inquire. But his theorem is unquestionably calculated to provoke the loudest and the heartiest mirth that ever acclaimed the advent of Momus or Erycina. For it is this—that "Art and Joy go together," and that tragic art is not art at all.

"Arter that, let's have a glass of wine," said a famous countryman of Mr. Whistler's, on the memorable occasion when he was impelled to address his friend Mr. Brick in the immortal words, "Keep cool, Jefferson. Don't bust." The admonition may not improbably be required by the majority of readers who come suddenly and unawares upon this transcendent and pyramidal pleasantry. The laughing Muse of the lecturer, "quam Jocus circumvolat," must have glanced round in expectation of the general appeal, "After that, let us take breath." And having done so, they must have remembered that they were not in a serious world; that they were in the fairyland of fans, in the paradise of pipkins, in the limbo of blue china, screens, pots, plates, jars, joss-houses, and all the fortuitous frippery of Fusi-yama.

And yet, they will presently have reflected, even this hyperbolical extravagance of jocularity does not succeed in launching a really original paradox. There have always been audacious humourists who asserted, and anæsthetic imbéciles who believed, that the spirit of art was essentially and exclusively joyous, or exclusively and essentially mournful. A type of the former class of fool has been taken after the very life by the yet undethroned sovereign of English poetesses.

> "My critic Jobson recommends more mirth,
> Because a cheerful genius suits the times,
> And all true poets laugh unquenchably
> Like Shakespeare and the gods. That's very hard.
> The gods may laugh, and Shakespeare: Dante smiles
> With such a needy heart on two pale lips,
> We cry, 'Weep rather, Dante.'"

It is a cruel but an inevitable Nemesis which reduces even a man of real genius, keen-witted and sharp-sighted, to the level of the critic Jobson, to the level of the dotard and the dunce, when paradox is discoloured by personality and merriment is distorted by malevolence. No man who really knows the excellence, the variety, the serious and noble qualities of Mr. Whistler's best work, will imagine that he really believes the highest expression of his art to be realized in reproduction of the grin and glare, the smirk and leer, of Japanese womanhood as represented in its professional types of beauty; but to all appearance he would fain persuade us that he does. Unhappily for his chance of success in the attempt to depreciate and degrade his genius to an equality with the highest type of Asiatic æstheticism, his etchings and his portraits have not yet been consigned to the flames which must of necessity consume them before he can possibly be accepted as a genuine child of Japan. In the latter of the two portraits to which I have already referred there is an expression of living character, an intensity of pathetic power, which gives to that noble work something of the impressiveness proper to a tragic or elegiac poem.

This, however, is an exception to the general rule of Mr. Whistler's way of work: an exception, it may be alleged, which proves the rule. But that apology will by no means hold water. In one of the delightful minor works of an always delightful humourist, we are introduced to a good man of the name of William—I cannot, I will not allow myself to imagine that the perversity of political malevolence could suggest an allusion which nothing should induce me to hint at—who having led a life of abnormal virtue for many, many years, is induced to commit a treacherous and rascally crime by pure curiosity to know from experience what may be the feelings of a deliberate malefactor. Now the violation of principle committed on that occasion by Mr. Gilbert's exemplary experimentalist was not graver in its departure from an established standard of

conduct than is this infringement by Mr. Whistler of the hard and fast line laid down by himself as the condition of all true art. A single infraction of the moral code, a single breach of artistic law, suffices to vitiate the position of the preacher. And this is no slight escapade, no venial or casual aberration; it is a full and frank defiance, a deliberate and elaborate denial, hurled right in the face of Japanese jocosity, flung straight in the teeth of the theory which condemns high art, under penalty of being considered intelligent, to remain eternally on the grin.

If it be objected that to treat this theorem gravely is "to consider too curiously" the tropes and the phrases of a jester of genius, I have only to answer that it very probably may be so, but that the excuse for such error must be sought in the existence of the genius. A man of genius is scarcely at liberty to choose whether he shall or shall not be considered as a serious figure—one to be acknowledged and respected as an equal or a superior, not applauded and dismissed as a tumbler or a clown. And if the better part of Mr. Whistler's work as an artist is to be accepted as the work of a serious and intelligent creature, it would seem incongruous and preposterous to dismiss the more characteristic points of his theory as a lecturer with the chuckle or the shrug of mere amusement or amazement. Moreover, if considered as a joke, a mere joke, and nothing but a joke, this gospel of the grin has hardly matter or meaning enough in it to support so elaborate a structure of paradoxical rhetoric. It must be taken, therefore, as something serious in the main; and if so taken, and read by the light reflected from Mr. Whistler's more characteristically brilliant canvases, it may not improbably recall a certain phrase of Molière's, which at once passed into a proverb—"Vous êtes orfèvre, M. Josse." That worthy tradesman, it will be remembered, was of opinion that nothing could be so well calculated to restore a drooping young lady to mental and physical health as the present of a handsome set of jewels. Mr. Whistler's opinion that there is nothing like leather—of a jovial and Japanese design—savours somewhat of the Oriental cordwainer.

But if we must more or less respectfully decline to accept "The Preacher" as a prophet, we may all agree in applause of the brilliant humour which barbs the shafts of good sense and sound reasoning aimed by the satirist at the common enemies of all good work—"a teeming, seething, busy mass, whose virtue was industry, and whose industry was vice." Nothing can be truer, and nothing could be more happily expressed. And, as a wiser than all the wise men of Greece was wont impressively to observe, "the bearings of this observation lays in the application on it." That was no part of Captain Bunsby's duty; it was apparently no part of the lecturer's; and it certainly is no part of mine.

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE.

Mr. Whistler's Lecture on Art.

To speak the truth, the whole truth, & nothing but the truth, may justly be required of the average witness: it cannot be expected, it should not be exacted, of any critical writer (or lecturer) on art, any form of, even when the writer is an acknowledged & indisputable master in his own line of work, it is not to be supposed or imagined that these can be any thing to add to his conclusions, or that his utterances are to be of necessity accepted without qualification or reserve. The great question is whether he is right or wrong in his main contention — whether the message he delivers is worthy of consideration & acceptance in its most significant & distinctive point. And it appears to one at least of those unfortunate 'outsiders' for whose (or whose 'meddling') judgment Mr. Whistler has so imperial & Olympian a contempt that the most notable thing in the famous lecture on art which he has now transmitted to the printers is the assertion in terms of ~~admirable~~ most felicitous accuracy, the explanation on grounds which no imaginable reader could mistake, of a dominant & central truth which is not more certain, more necessary, more important, with reference to any one of the arts than to any other; & which is more vital, more certain, more indispensable as a condition of creative work than any other ~~principle or axiom~~ fact or principle whatever. This is the principle of independence: the simple & sufficient gospel which affirms that the first duty of a workman in any particular line is to do good work in that & no other than that line; & that if he does this it is a matter of quite

secondary consideration whether his work may or may not be commendable on any foreign or external or accidental ground. It should be unnecessary to add that this principle cannot either fairly or plausibly be so strained & wrested as to cover for example the literary offences of French pornographers & cosprologists. M. Zola & his merry men are artists only in the sense—if such a sense there be—in which the term is applicable to a dealer in ~~obscene~~ coloured photographs of unmentionable subjects. Sweeping aside into the gutter such dirty little vermin as know no more of aesthetics than of ethics, of taste or intelligence than of decency or shame, we proceed to examine the question as seriously stated by an artist & a theorist of serious pretentions & undisputable ~~claims~~ accomplishments. And we find what we might have made sure of finding in the present case: brilliant & pungent wit, wisdom salted with paradox & reason spiced with eccentricity: truths & semi-truths, admirable propositions & questionable inferences. Much that Mr. Whistler has to say about the primary requisites & the radical conditions of art is not merely sound & solid good sense as well as ~~pointed~~ vivid & pointed rhetoric, it is a message very specially needed by the present generation of students in art or letters. Those only who have laid it to heart may be permitted to point out that it is not all the truth; that it is by no manner of means an exhaustive & complete statement of the capacities & the duties, the objects & the properties of creative or imaginative art.

Let us begin with the end, as all reasonable people always do: we

shall find that Mr. Whistler concedes to French art a place beside Japanese. Now this, on his own showing, will never do: it crosses, it contravenes, it nullifies, it pulverizes his theory or his principle of limitation. If Japanese art is right in confining itself to what can be "broidered upon the fan" - & the gist of the whole argument is in favour of this assumption, then the sculpture which appeals indeed first of all to our perception of beauty, to the delight of the eye, to the wonder & the worship of the intellect instinct or the sense, but which in every possible instance appeals also to far other emotions & far other sympathies than these, is as absolutely wrong, as demonstrably inferior, as any picture or as any carving which may be so degenerate & so debased as to concern itself with a story or a subject. Assuredly Phidias thought of other things than "arrangements" in marble - as certainly as Aeschylus thought of other things than "arrangements" in metre. Nor am I solely afraid that an enraged Velasquez promoted to heaven will not at the foot of Fusi-yama. Japanese art is not merely the incomparable achievement of certain lovely harmonies in colour: it is the negation, the immolation, the annihilation of everything else. By the code which accepts as the highest of models & masterpieces the cups & fans & screens with which the poor world has been so grievously pestered of late years as ever it was in Shakespeare's time with such waterflies - diminutives of nature -

as excited the scorn of his metabolizing cynic, Velasquez is unquestionably condemned as Raphael or Titian. It is true that his miraculous power of hand makes beautiful for us the deformity of dwarfs, & dignifies the degradation of princes: but that is not the question. It is true, again, that Mr. Whistler's own merest arrangements in colour are lovely & effective: but his portraits— to speak of these alone— are liable to the damning & intolerable imputation of possessing not merely other qualities than these, but qualities which actually appeal— I blush to remember & I shudder to ~~write~~ record it— which actually appeal to the intelligence & the emotions, to the mind & heart of the spectator. It would be quite useless for Mr. Whistler to protest— if he should be so disposed— that he never meant to put study of character & revelation of intellect into his portrait of Mr. Carlyle, or intense pathos of significance & tender depth of expression into the portrait of his own venerable mother. The scandalous fact remains, that he has done so: & in so doing has openly violated & implicitly abjured the creed & the catechism of Japan.

Apart from the crowning & central merit of this lecture, Whistler which I have attempted to indicate at starting, the most notable & memorable thing in it is rather the excellence of certain detached or detachable passages or phrases than any continuity of reasoning or coherence of argument. But some of these passages or phrases are very jewels of epigram or of illustration. What, for instance, can be

happier or more sensible, wittier or more effective than this? 'To say to the painter that Nature is to be taken as she is, is to say to the player that he may sit on the piano.' Not, of course, that this is a discovery of Mr. Whistler's: for the finest & the fullest evidence of its truth is flashed out on us from every great & characteristic work of Turner's.

This, again, is a very just as well as a very striking sarcasm: though it does not exactly prove that there is no loveliness in distinct outline, no grandeur in luminous clearness,

'The dignity of the snow-capped mountain is lost in distinctness, but the joy of the tourist is to recognize the traveller on the top. The desire to see, for the sake of seeing, is, with the mass, alone the one to be gratified, hence the delight in detail.'

But it is hardly to the countrymen of David Cox that the beauty & the glory of painted wind & cloud & mist can be preached as the gospel of a new revelation. However, we can but be grateful for this indirect protest against the kind of art which gives us landscapes worthy only of a botanist or geometrician; & seascapes which represent the most lovely & luminous & various & subtle in colour of all imaginable seas — our own incomparable Channel — as a dead metallic mass of drearily stupid blue, so hard that if you were to hit it with a hammer the hammer would break into shivers, so monotonous & monochromical that it would almost be a libel on the very Mediterranean itself.

Another excellent remark may be quoted from a later part of this lecture: — 'Art happens — no law is kept from it: no privilege may

depend upon it; the vastest intelligence cannot bring it about, & puny efforts to make it universal end in quaint comedy or coarse farce.

Unquestionably they may or they must do so: but it does not follow that all efforts to widen the sphere of appreciation, to enlarge the circle of intelligence, must needs be puny or unprofitable. Good intentions will not secure good results: but neither - strange as it may seem - will the absence of good intentions. And when Mr. Whistler informs us that "there never was an artistic period" we must reply that the statement, so far as it is true, is the flattest of all possible truisms: for no mortal ever maintained that there ever was a period in which all men were either good artists or good judges of art. But when we pass from the positive to the comparative degree of historic or retrospective criticism, we must ask whether the lecturer means to say that there have not been times when the general standard of taste & judgment, reason & perception was so much higher than at other times that such periods may justly & accurately be defined as artistic. If he does mean to say this, he is beyond answer & beneath contradiction: in other words, he is where an artist of Mr. Whistler's splendid genius & a writer of Mr. Whistler's can by no possibility find himself. If he does not mean to say this, what he means to say is exactly as well worth saying, as valuable & as important a piece of information, as the news that Queen Anne is no more, or that two & two are not generally supposed to make five.

But if the light & glittering bark of this brilliant amateur in the art of letters is not unerringly steered with equal dexterity of hand between the Scylla & Charybdis of paradox & platitude, it is impossible that in its course it should not once & again touch upon some point worth notice if not exploration. Even that miserable

animal 'the unattached writer' may gratefully & respectfully recognize the accurate apprehension & felicitous application of the well-nigh most hackneyed ~~quotation~~ verse in all the range of Shakespeare's ~~verse~~ - which yet is almost invariably misquoted, misapplied. 'One touch of nature makes the whole world kin:' & this, as the poet goes on to explain, is that all, with one consent, prefer worthless but showy novelties to precious but familiar possessions. 'This one chord that vibrates with all', says Mr. Whistler, who proceeds to cite artistic examples of the lamentable fact, 'this one unspoken sympathy that pervades humanity, is - Vulgarity.' But the consequence which he proceeds to indicate & to deplore is calculated to strike his readers with a sense of mild & hilarious astonishment. It is that men of sound judgment & pure taste, & clear perceptions, & quick feelings, & whose voices make themselves heard in Parliament, most unfortunately & most inexplicably began to get a hearing. Porson, as all the world knows, observed of the Germans of his day that 'in Greek' they were 'sadly to seek'. It is no discredit to Mr. Whistler if this is his case also: but then he would do well to eschew the use of a Greek term lying so far out of the common way as the word 'aesthete'. Not merely the only accurate meaning but the only possible meaning of that word is nothing more but nothing less than ~~definitely comprehended by~~ this: an intelligent, appreciative, quick-witted person: in a word, as the lexicon has it, 'one who perceives'. The man who is no aesthete stands confessed, by the very logic of language & the necessity of the case, as a thick-witted, insensible,

senseless irremediable blockhead. I do not wish to insult Mr. Whistler, but I feel bound to avow my impression that there is no man now living who less deserves the honour of ~~a place~~ enrolment in such ranks as these — of a seat in the synagogue of the aesthetic. I cannot bring myself to descend to flattery so gross & insincere as would be the admission that a soul of his spiritual stature is also among the prophets of Philistia: that his place is beside the idolaters with an imperfect conception which surely they cannot appreciate of the enormity & danger of intelligence, appears a cutting & branding insult. It would be no doubt be most unseemly — & to the shrinking modesty, the too sensitive diffidence of Mr. Whistler, it would of course be quite exceptionally painful — to claim the title, to arrogate the honours, of a person so exceptionally endowed with good taste, right feeling, keen insight, sound judgment, & clear perception, as especially to deserve the Platonic title of an aesthete: but however there were for no satire could be severe enough for the male or female fool who should venture to put forward such an arrogant claim; but it would be an incongruity even more portentous & prodigious, an incongruity for which Rabelais alone of all men could have supplied the fitting chain of epithets, if anarchist of skill so consummate, of tact so refined, of such so sensitive an instinct & so delicate an eccentricity, should use the word if he knew the meaning of the word — as a term of ridicule or reproach. Such abuse of language is permissible only to the driveling deliration of incapables (idiocy): but it is

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be certainly indecorous & possibly superfluous to enquire. But his theorum is
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Immediately after that, let's have a glass of wine, Reddich
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majority of readers who come suddenly & unawares upon this
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And having done so, they must have remembered that they were
not in a serious world; that they were in the fairyland of farce, in
the paradise of fopperies, in the limbo of blue china, screens, fruit
plates, ~~dishes~~ jars, prints & all the fripperies of Fun-yarma.
And yet, they will presently have reflected, even this hyperbolical

extravagance of jocularity does not succeed in bestowing a really original paradox. There have always been audacious ~~humorists~~ wags who aborted & anaesthetic imbeciles who believed that the spirit of mirth essentially & exclusively joyous — or exclusively essentially of sorrowful. A type of the former class has been taken after the very life by the ~~humorists of all the most perfect~~ yet undethroned sovereign of English practions.

> 'My critic Jobson recommends more mirth,
> Because a cheerful genius suits the times
> And all true poets laugh unquenchably
> Like Shakespeare & the gods. That's very hard.
> The gods may laugh, & Shakespeare: Dante smiles
> With such a needy heart on two pale lips,
> We cry, "Weep rather, Dante"

It is a cruel but an inevitable Nemesis which reduces even a man of real genius, keen-witted & sharp-sighted, to the level of the critic Jobson to the level of the dotard & the dunce — when paradox is discoloured by personality & merriment is distorted by malevolence. No man who really knows the excellence, the variety, the serious & noble qualities of Mr Whistler's best work, will imagine that he really believes the highest expression of his art to be the grin realized in ~~grotesque~~ the glare of Japanese ~~beauty~~ womanhood as represented in its professional types of beauty: but to all appearance he would fain persuade us that he does. Unhappily for his chance of success in the attempt to depreciate & degrade his genius to an equality with the highest type of ~~Asiatic~~ aesthetic art, his etchings & his portraits have not yet been consigned

to the flames which must of necessity consume them before he can possibly be accepted as a genuine child of Japan. In the latter of the two portraits to which I have already referred there is (an exhibition of living character) ~~a depth of human dignity & tragic character~~ to ~~keep~~ which gives ~~an~~ intensity of pathetic power, ~~which makes the sight of~~ that noble work ~~rather painful than pleasural~~ rather of the impassiveness proper to a tragic or elegiac poem. ~~of tragic than impassive~~ ~~& spectators whom we would call~~ ~~grandiose, dishe, & impervious to the charm & the dawn~~, the ~~beauty~~ ~~& pathos~~ of spirit I have known those on whom the contemplation of a picture so steeped in the tones of sorrow, so imbued with the very spirit of irrivible enduring melancholy, as this one seemed to them to be, had an effect too painful to be qualified (effaced or effaced) by the most appreciative sincerity & the most cordial (simplicity) of admiration.

This, however, is an exception to the general rule of Mr Whistler's way of work: an exception, it may be alleged, which proves the rule. But that apology will by no means hold water. In one of the delightful minor works of our one great living humourist we are introduced to a good man of the name of William – I cannot, I will not allow myself to imagine that the perversity of political malevolence could suggest an allusion which nothing should induce me to hint at – who having led a life of abnormal virtue for many many years, is induced to commit a treacherous & rascally crime by a pure curiosity to know (may be) from experience what the feelings of a deliberate malefactor. ~~The result is penal servitude~~. How the violation of principle committed on that occasion by Mr.

~~William does not go~~ Gilbert's exemplary experimentalist was not graver in its departure from his ~~an habitual~~ an established standard of conduct than is this ~~violation~~ infringement by Mr. Whistler of the hard & fast line laid down by himself as the condition of all true art. A single infraction of the moral code, a single breach of artistic law, suffices to vitiate the position of the preacher, and this is no slight escapade, no venial or casual aberration: it is a full & frank defiance, a deliberate & elaborate denial, ~~flung~~ hurled right in the face of Japanese jocosity, ~~lashed~~ flung straight in the teeth of the theory which condemns high art, under penalty of being considered intelligent, to remain eternally on the grin. Bunthorne

If it be objected that to treat this theorem gravely is to consider too curiously the ~~exact phrases~~ proper & the phrases of a jester of genius, I have only to answer that it very probably may be so: but that the excuse for such error must be sought in the existence of the genius. A man of genius is scarcely at liberty ~~to choose~~ whether he shall or shall not be considered as a serious figure ~~to be~~ & respected as an equal or a superior, ~~or not~~ applauded & dismissed as a tumbler or a clown. And if the better part of Mr. Whistler's work as an artist is to be ~~accepted~~ as the work of a serious & intelligent creature, it would seem incongruous & preposterous to dismiss the more characteristic points of his theory as a lecturer with the chuckle or the shrug of mere amusement or amazement. Moreover, if considered as a joke, this gospel of the grin has hardly matter or meaning enough in it to support so elaborate a structure of paradoxical rhetoric. It must be taken therefore as something serious in the main: & if so taken, & read by the light reflected from Mr. Whistler's more characteristically brilliant canvasses, it may not improbably

~~recall a remark~~ recall a certain phrase of Molière's which at once passed into a proverb- "Vous êtes orfèvre, M. Josse." That worthy tradesman, it will be remembered, was of opinion that nothing could be well calculated to restore a drooping young lady to mental & physical health as the present of a handsome set of jewels. Mr Whistler's opinion that there is nothing like leather- of a jovial & Japanese design- savours somewhat of the Oriental cordwainer.

But if we must more or less respectfully decline to accept "The Preacher" as a prophet, we may all agree in applause of the brilliant humour which barbs the shafts of good sense & sound reasoning aimed by the ~~artist~~ satirist at the common enemies of all good work- "a teeming, seething, busy mass, whose virtue was industry, & whose industry was vice." Nothing can be truer, and nothing could be more happily expressed. And, as a wiser than all the wise men of Greece was wont impressively to observe, "the bearings of this observation lays in the application on it." That was no part of Captain Burnsby's duty: it was apparently no part of the lecturer's: & it certainly is no part of mine.

Algernon Charles Swinburne

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